

RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOLS

The Motivation for the Denmark Study

The “Learning from Denmark” study differed from previous studies in that it focused on only one aspect of Danish education – the Danish approach to the high school years. Two developments in North Carolina motivated the study planners to hone in on Denmark’s high school system, considered by many to be one of the world’s most effective.

The first development was a series of recommendations calling on North Carolina to dramatically rethink and revamp its approach to education in the high school years. The recommendations came from Governor Michael Easley’s Education First Task Force, a task force appointed in Easley’s first year in office and charged with giving the Governor a road map for school improvement.

Members of the Task Force included business leaders, elected officials and educators. Krista Tillman, President of BellSouth North Carolina, chaired the working group that focused on high schools. As the working group reviewed performance data for North Carolina high school students it became clearer and clearer that the failure of high schools to motivate and retain young people through graduation was an economic Achilles Heel that, if ignored, could slow the state’s progress to a crawl. Consider the following:

- North Carolina ranks in the top ten states in terms of numbers of students not successfully completing high school in four years. National studies of cohorts of entering ninth graders find that in North Carolina over 40% do not complete high school four years later.
- For those who graduate from high school, many are found to be deficient in either math or reading skills and are required to take remedial work upon entering two- or four-year colleges.

Over a four-year period of time 103,578 community college students enrolled in basic skills courses covering middle and high school level course work.

- The academic top 10% of North Carolina high school students perform considerably poorer than do their peers around the country when taking the SAT test.

The chart on this page dramatically illustrates the dilemma facing the state. It tracks student progress from the time they enter ninth grade through six years after their scheduled high school graduation date. The results are sobering.

Data such as that contained in this chart coupled with testimony from “end users” of high school (i.e., employers, representatives of the military and officials from two-and-four year colleges), led the Task Force to recommend the following:

- A North Carolina High School Innovation Fund to spur the development of smaller high schools and/or small learning communities within large high schools.
- Creation of “theme” schools that have a specific focus, especially a focus leading to pathways to higher education and meaningful employment.
- Guidance and support programs that give students motivation and a clearer sense of purpose through the high school years.

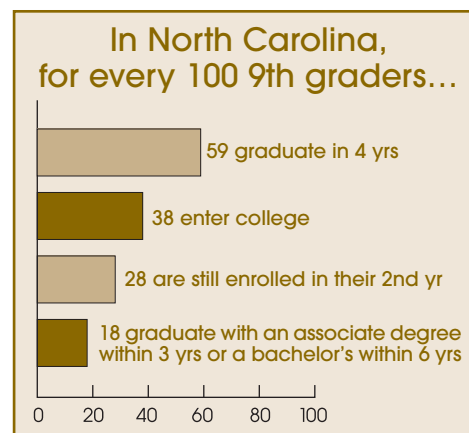
The second development leading to the high school study was the New Schools Project, a project aimed at spurring high school innovation, that was made possible when North Carolina became the fourth state to receive a large grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The goals of the New Schools Project mirror the recommendations that came from the Governor’s

Education First Task Force. Specifically:

- Spur the creation of small, focused high schools that better engage and motivate students.
- Create better pathways leading to two- and four-year college education for far more young people.
- Link high school education to the economic needs of communities and regions in order to give young people more opportunities in the world of work.

These two developments have the potential to put North Carolina in the forefront of what is becoming a national movement to dramatically change education for high school students. The movement has become a priority for the U.S. Department of Education, which recently convened a summit on high schools. It has also become a major priority of the National Association of Chief State School Officers, the national organization representing state superintendents and education commissioners across the nation.



(from left to right) participant Howard-Vital presenting a gift to Merete Pedersen; teacher working with students; participant Preston with Danish Youth-On-Youth Counselor

